

Level and Criteria of Students' Foreign-Language Communicative Competence

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Abstract

This research was conducted to examine the level of students' foreign-language communicative competence and it was based on general observations of the authors' pedagogical career and description of the first stage of pedagogical experiment the aim of which was forming a foreign-language communicative competence of students at non-linguistic departments of University. The authors presented the methodology of monitoring the process of diagnosing the level and criteria of student's foreign-language communicative competence while teaching English as a foreign language. Moreover, foreign-language communicative competence the authors regard consisting of several components such as regulatory, personal, organizing or managing, informative and communicative.

Keywords: *communicative competence; teaching foreign language; diagnostics and techniques of forming competences*

1. Introduction

Many students from non-linguistic departments, lack communicative competence, despite studying English as a compulsory subject at school, may still continue to pick up the language and develop their communication skills. There are qualification characteristics of a bachelor degree (non-linguistic specialties in foreign language), established by the state educational standard of the higher professional education in Russia. Graduates are expected to use their language skills to demonstrate abilities such as: written reasoned statement of own point of view; public speech, argument, conducting discussion; critical perception of information; responsible behavior; cooperation, negotiating and solving conflicts; interaction in intercultural environment; communication.

Pedagogical monitoring of higher institutions entrants' communicative, organizational, reflexive, informational and other general and educational skills level came back with rather low results (Kondrateva, 2014). Many of these qualification requirements can be formed, developed and diagnosed during the course of studying English as a foreign language. The authors touch upon only two significant factors that influence the whole process of forming foreign-language communicative competence such as analysis of general educational abilities of students and psychological climate in student groups.

2. The Pedagogical Experiment

Methods have been developed to form communicative competence for students that are studying foreign languages. Organization of special events for practical use of these methods were necessary confirm scientific validity of the system. The carried-out comparative analysis of the theoretical and empirical data presented in modern psychology and pedagogical literature, allowed authors to make pedagogical experiment. Pedagogical experiment is the most effective solution in this research. As it is noted in the Philosophical encyclopedic dictionary, "experiment ... carries out function of criterion of the validity of scientific knowledge in general" (Philosophical encyclopedic dictionary, 1993).

After Yu.K. Babansky (Babansky Yu.K., 1982), we note that pedagogical experiment allows separating studied phenomenon from others, to change conditions of pedagogical impact on examinees, and to repeat the separate studied pedagogical phenomena approximately in the same conditions. Thus, realization of pedagogical experiment provides creation of circumstances, important for our research: active position of the researcher, objectivity of receiving experimental data, possibility of their generalization for more wide range of the pedagogical phenomena.

A.I. Piskunov and G. V. Vorobyov consider pedagogical experiment as "designing of pedagogical process according to a goal based on the available hypothesis and purposeful studying of the caused phenomenon in controlled and purposeful conditions" (The theory and practice of pedagogical experiment, 1979).

According to P. I. Pidkasty, the technique of pedagogical research is a set of methods, ways of the organization and regulation of pedagogical research, an order of their application and interpretation of the received results at achievement of a definite scientific purpose (The dictionary reference on a pedagogics, 2004).

The program of experiment for student's formation of communicative competence in a foreign language was developed, taking into account general requirements of experimental work and pedagogical research technique. It also relies on certain methods used for the study: Person-focused; competence-based and active; cultural and modular. The aim of the experiment was to check the initial level of foreign-language communicative competence of students; to get understanding about the system of formation of foreign-language communicative competence of students using special technology; and to carry out the analysis of the received results for the purpose of confirmation or denial of the made hypothesis.

The experimental work will help to achieve the goal by checking the efficiency of the developed system of formation of foreign-language communicative competence of students using special technology.

Following traditional logic of implementation of pedagogical experiment (Polonsky V. M., 1987; Gershunsky B. S., 2001), it was led in three stages: stating, forming and generalizing, each of which solved certain problems.

The first stage – stating was aimed to address the following problems: to study current condition of educational process for formation of students' foreign-language communicative competence; to develop technology of formation of students' foreign-language communicative competence; to define diagnostic methods allowing to estimate objectively the level of students' foreign-language communicative competence.

It took place during current educational activity in the Kazan (Volga region) federal university and involved eight student groups in the experiment: 3 control (42 students) and 4 experimental (58 students), students of 1 and 2 courses of the following specialties: "Information Technology", "Pharmacy" and "Geology".

At the beginning of research, there were defined students' general educational skills. For this purpose, we used techniques and methodology of G.V. Repkina (Repkina, 2009) and A.K. Markova (Markova, 1996), different testing, supervision and questioning methods.

Diagnostics showed the expected degree - low level (less than 69%) of educational abilities in the field of planning and rational performance of a task, reviewing the answer of the companion, participation in educational dialogue, preparation and fulfilment of a task, management the group.

The analysis of data of the personal focused diagnostics (Markova, 1996) showed that in the "knowledge" block only 51% of students scored satisfactory. In "ability to study" block only 57% showed satisfactory result. 55% of students had a high level of reflection. The block "possibilities for further training" has the following picture: 64% of students gave a satisfactory index. An average indicator is 56%.

An analysis of reader's activity of students in a foreign language based on own supervision and biographical particulars was carried out in order to determine initial level of informative component. The analysis showed that the level of reader's culture of most of students does not correspond to modern information development of society. 56% of students estimate the text on a factor of the importance, 31% – on a factor of availability and only 16% – on an interest factor, i.e. foreign-language reading is considered by most of students, first of all, as means of assimilation of a foreign language, but not as communication process. Only 37% of students analyze structure of the text, 30% critically estimate the read material on a factor of persuasiveness, 25% use the summary, a table of contents.

Results showed that only 52% of students comprehend the read material, a half of respondents have difficulties with understanding while reading. Structuring text or dividing in meaningful parts promotes not only the best understanding, but also application of information put in the text. However 27% of students rarely make the plan, 32% – do this type of work very rare. Less than 5% of respondents make theses while reading, nobody is engaged in making an abstract. The results testify the low level of informative component of foreign-language communicative competence.

As effective communication is one of the premises of successful cooperation and activity, the ability to communicate effectively in the intercultural context becomes indispensable from the activity of a modern specialist (Fortner, 1993; Scollon and Scollon, 1995). This component is the most important and in order to determine this, we analyzed the abilities of students to operate a dialogue; to listen to the speaker; to argue the point of view; to criticize, etc. Determination level of a communicative component was the following investigation phase. Students got a number of questionnaires and tests. 42% of them are very sociable, like to take part in discussions, but avoid serious subjects. They willingly get into conversation on any subject even if they have a vague idea of it; more often they do it on the internet. It's one of the new forms of communication nowadays. M. Castells characterizes internet-based communications, saying

that: „It is mass communication because it can potentially reach a global audience, as in the posting of a video on YouTube, a blog with RSS links to a number of web sources, or a message to a massive e-mail list. At the same time, it is self-communication because the production of the message is self-generated, the definition of the potential receiver(s) is self-directed, and the retrieval of specific messages or content from the World Wide Web and electronic communication is self-selected” (Castells, 2009). Increasingly, individual members of human society have a real chance to express their personal opinions of, attitude to what is going on, what is being discussed, a chance to actively participate, to exchange ideas, to find supporters, co-thinkers, co-workers, co-livers, to stop feeling lonely – last but not least (Svetlana G. Ter-Minasova, 2014). 16 % of respondents are to a certain extent sociable, and themselves feel quite confident in unfamiliar situations, new problems do not frighten them but they still meet with new people cautiously. In their statements, there is a lot of sarcasm without basis. 10% of students are originally sociable and inquisitive, rather tolerant in communication with others. 27% of students use other’s opinions to achieve the object; often raise the voice. 21% of students are capable to defend their point of view, can carry on dialogue; may change the view if necessary. Sometimes show sharpness, disrespect for the interlocutor. 12% of respondents are able to accept any idea with understanding. 15% of students are not able to listen, are bad interlocutors. 45% critically treat statements, draw hasty conclusions and look for the hidden sense of the told. It is possible to call 40% of students good interlocutors though they sometimes they don’t fully understand their partners. 33,3% come into a conflict with others. 66,7% of students are tactful and peaceful, avoid critical situations. 45,4% of students with average communicative control are sincere, but sometimes reserved. 54% of the tested students are with high communicative control. They take any role easily, react flexibly in changing situations, feel well and even are able to predict impression that they make on people around them.

Communicative competence and ability to speak foreign languages are amongst essential competences necessary for a contemporary specialist (Hutmacher, 1996; Bowden, Marton, 1998). As a result of questioning students in the middle of the 1st semester (1st year) and the beginning of 3rd semester (2nd year), a characteristic of students’ relation to communicative competence in a “Foreign Language” was obtained. The results from the research prove the need to consider communicative competence as one of the most important elements of vocational training for future specialists. Language is a universal method to transfer social experience. Moreover, conscious, purposeful and expedient transfer of social experience is an essence of education and vocational training. In this aspect, identification and definition became the purpose of questioning: students’ recognition of communicative competence, the importance of a foreign language course, opportunities for professional development in vocational training.

We observed the ability to operate the conflict, work in a team and direct a team by diagnosing, managing or organizing a component. Regulative component had to define the following abilities: goal-setting, planning, reflection, self-assessment, analysis, allocation of the main thing, comparison, generalization, systematization.

The psychological climate and interpersonal relations in students groups were examined with sociometry, introduced by A.N. Lutoshkin.

Prevalent positive answers in estimating features of functioning of a student group, testify rather favorable psychological climate and not a low level of a managing or organizing component of foreign-language communicative competence.

The conducted sociometric researches revealed existence of well-outlined mini-communities in the groups, which is a sign of its social maturity. Methods of evaluating communication competences are useful in constructing group and individual programs focused on specific communication competences, rather than on general communication skills (Włoszczak-Szubzda, A., Jarosz, M.J., 2013). Most often people unite with the close statuses, and research confirms it: at number of mutual elections, both in control, and in experimental groups it is possible to allocate separate mini-communities. Popular students make up one micro group, they have good indicators on progress, interest in the chosen profession that allows assuming the conscious choice based on mutual understanding and members of this group have mutual sympathies.

The results of diagnostic testing and authors’ analysis allow dividing all the students taken part in experiment into 3 groups with different levels of foreign-language competence: reproductive, adaptive and creative.

The first – reproductive level (19 students) has the following features: foreign-language communicative competence has uncertain character. In the presence of positive cognitive interest to a subject, students consider the knowledge of a foreign language optional since they believe that in the forthcoming activity this knowledge will not be useful to them. Interest arises only occasionally, depending on the information value of the studied material and their emotional state. At the same time, many students of this group would like to master informal foreign speech.

The second level – adaptive (55 students) has the following features: students study foreign language with most interest in University than in school. They consider that the knowledge of a foreign language can be useful in everyday life and in professional activity. They also admit the importance of a foreign language as source of additional information

in the specialty but do not realize other opportunities of a foreign language in vocational training, in particular, the analysis, generalization, comparison, etc. Representatives of this group try to develop and improve knowledge of a subject and speech skills. Knowledge of a foreign language develops in a certain system, they prepare additional reports; participate in out-of-class actions in a foreign language.

The third level – creative (26 students), shows that foreign-language communicative competence is important for students in their future professional activity- they believe that foreign language skills promote development. They also consider studying as a necessary element for future profession, so they persistently master a foreign language taking part in scientific conferences, drawing up reviews of scientific literature. Many attend additional language courses, so knowledge of a foreign language has a system character. Students of this group prefer creative types of work and tasks demanding independence.

After this investigation phase, proceeding from results of questioning, conversations, supervision, it is possible to draw the following conclusions:

- Students feel need to master their level of foreign-language communicative competence. Their desire to know a foreign language seems natural. They show interest in scientific publications of foreign countries in the specialty and want to promote development in specific professional field.

3. Concluding Remarks

The analysis of results showed that 55% of students possess managing or organizing skills, 64% of students possess communicative component, 44% of students have a high rate of regulatory competence, 54% of students possess informative competence and 43% have special features of character, which will help them to integrate into academic and professional community in future.

Thus, the student in their 1st or 2nd year, learning a foreign language is a person, who loves to communicate but show no interest to study. The low level of proficiency in planning, a goal setting, reflection and high self-esteem, testifies the lack of regulatory competence. Students easily distinguish the main thing, compare; however, such operations as analysis, generalization and systematization, demand further improvement. Sometimes students are not good interlocutors, draw hasty conclusions and cannot criticize without convincing arguments. Students can find and select the necessary information but it was difficult to present, summarize and compress information. Insufficient degree of informative component leads to poor regional and foreign geographic and culture knowledge. Students find work in teams interesting, but prefer to be direct, not to cooperate with others. Students who started professional education have poor motivation to learning foreign languages.

All previously mentioned testifies the reproductive level of students' foreign-language communicative competence. There is an imperative need in purposeful pedagogical activities for improvement of this fact in the process of teaching a foreign language.

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